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Agency Is Weak but Flexing New Muscles

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Leader of Southern California planning group says it is making headway against regional problems.

By Daryl Kelley

Times Staff Writer

The moment Mark Pisano had relentlessly pursued arrived with an emotional punch, when the political cats he'd been trying to herd for decades finally fell into a single line.

On a unanimous vote, 45 public officials who rarely agreed on anything approved a strategy for solving Southern California's daunting problems of growth.

"The only experience I have had that was more intense was when I had my three children," said Pisano, 63, who adjourned to a quiet dinner with his wife, Jane. "We toasted with a glass of wine, and I told her, 'We finally did it.' "

In the 16 months since that vote by directors of the Southern California Assn. of Governments, the nation's largest metropolitan planning agency seems finally to have hit its stride.

As the agency with the unfortunate nickname — SCAG — turns 40 this month, it owes much of its newfound stature to the indefatigable Pisano, a wonkish bureaucrat with the survival skills of a chameleon.

After all, he's led SCAG for 29 years, presiding over a confederation that critics say has no reason to exist — in a region whose cohesion has been compared to that of the former Soviet Union.

Its formidable mission is to develop plans for transportation, air quality, aviation and housing in a sprawling region that covers the counties of Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura.

This loose, voluntary union of 160 cities and six counties is all but toothless, with no power to tax or to legislate, only to advise and cajole.

Its greatest power is to draft regional plans for transportation: If a project is not on the regional plan, it doesn't get federal funding. In recent years, SCAG has also been an unpopular state enforcer, imposing quotas for new housing on cities — a program that was intended to spread responsibility for growth but that has spread resentment as well.

All in all, it hasn't been an easy road for SCAG, or for its veteran executive director — an affable man with a penchant for unconventional planning schemes. Some call him a visionary; others quixotic. Either way, he has suffered some setbacks.

His plan for regional shuttle buses stalled, for instance, as did that for a 300-mph monorail linking the region's city centers and airports.

His efforts to spread airline service more evenly throughout the region lost ground when voters rejected a second large airport for Orange County and an \$11-billion modernization was approved for Los Angeles International Airport.

Orange County nearly divorced SCAG in the early 1990s. And the organization's state and federal funding was jeopardized several years ago by what auditors called historical weaknesses in its accounting and cash flow.

Some say Pisano's primary success has been keeping his job, and hanging on, mostly, to potential breakaway republics.

"He hasn't been fired, and he hasn't incited a revolution," said USC planning professor Dowell Myers. "And that's a measure of his ability to balance competing objectives. I don't know who could have done it better."

Supporters and critics alike say they like and respect Pisano for his intelligence, knowledge and diplomacy.

He is "seen as a national leader in the intellectual planning world — in thinking about how to do this work better," said Nick Bollman, president of the nonprofit California Center for Regional Leadership.

But even some of Pisano's friends are no fan of his organization.

"This is an agency that studies things that may never happen," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, a longtime friend. Citing the monorail project as an example, he said: "If my grandchildren live to see it, I'll be surprised."

"Bureaucracy on steroids" is how Larry Parrish, chief administrator for Riverside County and former chief executive for Orange County, describes SCAG. But he adds, "I'm really sincere when I say Mark is a wonderful guy who was born to do what he does."

SCAG was formed in a shotgun wedding of cities and counties, when state and federal officials ordered local governments to set aside parochial interests to build a metropolis that works — or lose funding.

Twenty-seven cities — including Santa Ana, Garden Grove and Costa Mesa — never joined or have dropped out. Some say the Los Angeles-based association, with 110 employees and a \$35-million annual budget, remains too remote or detached to answer their needs.

But SCAG and Pisano are gaining a growing constituency for their ideas — not because of a growing sense of municipal brotherhood but because the region's problems are so severe.

"Cities and counties ... now understand they have to work with their neighbors," Pisano said, "because we're facing absolutely overwhelming, intractable problems."

The Southland has grown from 8 million residents in 1965 to 18 million today — and is projected to reach 23 million by 2030.

The region's freeways have become the nation's most congested, and its air quality and housing prices are among the worst. Meanwhile, it has become the poorest large urban area in the U.S. And its homes are the most crowded.

That has given SCAG a soapbox — based on reality, not futuristic concepts. At that meeting in 2004 that Pisano remembers as so pivotal, agency directors — all elected local officials — responded with a clear, simple strategy for what planners call "smart growth." It was an approach that Pisano did not invent but that he had been promoting for two decades.

In practice, it meant clustering high-density residential development near job centers or transit stations. The idea was to cut traffic and smog while still adding hundreds of thousands of homes.

Growth would focus on 2% of the region's 38,000 square miles — in existing municipal centers, commercial corridors or near transit stops.

Though elated, Pisano recalls thinking after the vote that the hardest work was still ahead. He expected four or five cities to volunteer to pilot the so-called "2% strategy."

"But now we have 20 or 30 cities that want to work with us on this," he said.

Monrovia, for example, hopes to build at least 1,000 apartments and condos near the planned extension of the Gold Line light rail, and 1,000 more mixed with retail shops in the nearby downtown. About a half-million square feet of offices would also be built near the train station, which is just one stop away from a huge job center at the City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte.

"It's not pie in the sky," said Alice Griselle, Monrovia community development director. "It's something we can run with."

Pasadena developer Donald Brackenbush, a leader in the Urban Land Institute, agreed. "With the 2% strategy, SCAG finally has an understandable story to tell." In keeping with SCAG's history, however, others are not disposed to hand the agency or its director much credit.

Most growth will still happen in far-flung suburbs, said demographer Joel Kotkin.

"The 2% strategy has about as much chance of happening as the Messiah coming," he said.

SCAG was formed Oct. 28, 1965, at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. Pisano arrived 11 years later.

Then 34, he had been a fast-track academic — a high school valedictorian in San Jose and a class president and national rowing champion at Georgetown University, where he completed courses for a doctorate before directing the water division of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Washington.

He settled in Los Feliz with his wife, president of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Pisano always has spoken in paragraphs of his vision for Southern California and its place in the nation and the world. He's always had a sense of the worst-case scenario as well.

"I remember when 'Blade Runner' came out," said Stan Oftelie, former director of the Orange County Transportation Authority, of the bleak, futuristic movie set in Los Angeles. "Mark told me he sent his staff to see it, and told them if they didn't do their jobs, that's what L.A. would look like."

Looking back, Pisano sees accomplishments amid the disappointments:

In 1978, SCAG drafted the region's first air-quality plan, he notes.

SCAG also takes credit for successfully pushing the \$2-billion Alameda rail corridor to move cargo from the ports and for backing three toll roads in Orange County.

Pisano says Southern California has emerged as a global gateway to the U.S., funneling 40% of imported goods through its ports and airports. Business could double if rail and truck cargo projects are constructed, he said.

He said construction bonds repaid mostly with user tolls could provide the money for two more of his pet projects: the high-speed monorail linking airports and city centers (estimated cost: \$27 billion) and a truckway from the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports to Ontario and Barstow (\$16 billion).

County transportation agencies have not made either project a priority. But Pisano is undeterred.

"I think my greatest strength is also my greatest weakness," he said. "I've always been ahead of myself."